

AN UNEXPECTED VIEW OF THE SEA FROM NORTHAMPTON

by Martin Marprelate

Out in the heaving black wasteland of the North Sea night, a giant of a man was gathering rope on his forearm. His rain smashed shoulders spread and hunched to the steady rhythm of his work as he gathered in the writhing nylon coils. He stood up straight to stretch an ache out of his knotted back. "Who do you think you are?" the enchanted winds sighed as they investigated the gaps in his clothing. The giant's white teeth shone like starlight as he smiled his 'not this time' smile. This was the same wind that would have petulantly smashed him from the rig a dozen times if it had not been for his lifeline. He chastely tightened his collar against the cold stroking of her fingers. If he had told the wind once, he had shouted it into her face a thousand times: the reason he worked on a platform above the dark oblivion of the waves was so he could feel like he was nobody at all...

Anita Carver lived about as far from the sea as any woman could in England. Her home was a crooked stack of rooms in a short grey Northampton terrace of identical buildings. It had once looked too modern, now looked too dated and had never looked right. The development had erased streets that the poor had lived in since the days of Queen Victoria and in taking away the memory of those places took away the last remaining thing of value many of its older inhabitants owned.

Not every memory was gone of course. The workhouse buildings still glowered over the poverty in their new guise as a hospital with geriatric facilities. Young doctors couldn't understand why the elderly would rather be sick at home than recover in the wards. Come and get well, they pleaded in vain but it would take more than a white coat and a few bottles of pills for the workhouse to be forgiven or forgotten. Anita's home backed up against the workhouse wall. It didn't bother her. Her elderly neighbours worried that she had no man to help her bring up her son, but they also found this gave them something to talk to her about. She told them not to worry, there was a man but he was working on the oil rigs. She was never really prepared for how interested people were to hear that.

"Oh, which one?" asked the old man two doors down who had taken in her milk the day she overslept to stop it getting stolen.

"Oh God, I can never remember," Anita giggled and tried to explain why she had overslept but her neighbour still wanted to talk about oil rigs.

"He's always going from one rig to another, I can't keep track, have they got names?" she shrugged.

The old woman who lost her cat asked bluntly one day: "When's he coming back?"

Anita said something about him having leave in a few weeks and something about him never being able to stay long. The old woman smiled sympathetically because she could see Anita was trying hard to share something truthful but every time she spoke the story changed.

"Something funny there," the old woman said later to the lady who brought her cat back.

There didn't need to be evidence of anything, just evidence of mystery and Anita Carver became a topic of conversation. Then her son started getting into trouble at school.

You would have needed a map, numbers and more than one leap of technological faith to find the giant in the North Sea. Helicopters and satellites would have been involved. You would have had to know where he was and have been able to tell that information to machines. You would never have met him by accident.

The journey to his steel drilling fortress was long, fraught with peril and required fantastic science. The flying machines that ferried vital supplies back and forth from the mainland could not afford space for luxuries and sentimental treasures. It could be a cold, hard, lonely, repetitive life on the rig but it took all humanity's ingenuity to achieve just that.

The giant of the North Sea depended on so many other people, so far away, that sometimes it seemed the moment he was forgotten about would be the moment he ceased to exist. On the best days he gazed across the gentleness of the peaceful water under an empty sky and he could almost believe it was true.

Anita Carver was jabbing her finger onto a school desk.

"Get me the headteacher then..."

"The headteacher is very busy..."

"I'll go to the governors. I want something done about this. It's bullying..."

"We're working on that but it's a two way street.

Perhaps if there weren't so many tall stories it wouldn't provoke the bullies," the teacher's Glaswegian accent honed every consonant she enunciated to a sharp point.

"Are you saying it's his own fault? What do you mean tall stories?"

"For instance, we keep hearing about his father working on oil rigs..."

"He does," Anita protested and even to herself she sounded like a teenager, filling her uncertainty with emotion. A memory of using the exact same words and tone flickered in the back of Anita's mind.

He does love me, she was telling her tearful mother. I'm keeping it and you cannot stop me.

And then bizarrely the teacher did the exact same thing her mother had done all those years ago.

She snorted dismissively.

"He does," Anita's voice weakened. No-one believes, she thought. Her concentration was keeling over. Her son had only been repeating the things his mother had told him. A painful, guilty ache took her breath away.

The teacher sighed and explained that there were a lot of pupils with absent fathers at the school. It was a sign of the times, she said. If someone was perceived to be denying that about themselves, it might look as if they were trying to elevate themselves above their peers dishonestly. It could be provocative no matter what the truth was.

Anita let the words rebound off her glassy eyed hurt and anger. She said: "If you won't do anything I'll take it to the newspapers."

"Fine," said the teacher, giving up. "Take it to the newspapers."

"It's not what you can't believe that's the problem. It's what you can't ignore," said the man who now didn't feel he should take in Anita's milk because she hadn't gone out. Three visitors had been and gone from her house, the slam of their car doors as sudden as gunshots in the night but Anita hadn't shown her face yet. The sun would be on the milk bottles if she didn't take them in soon.

The stooping elderly lady who had stopped to chat on her way to the shop began a rolling mumble that became the words: "Car doors, bloody nuisance, the last one was half past twelve..."

"It was later than that. Half past one more like. Who has visitors at that time of night?"

The lady raised her eyebrows and the thin mottled skin of her brow wrinkled with scepticism.

The man continued: "I don't judge people. What she gets up to behind closed doors is her business. All I'm saying is have some consideration. All the comings and goings at all times of night. Of course if you hear a car door you've got to have a look. By the time I've got my dressing gown on I'm properly awake. Once I'm awake that's it."

"Can't get back to sleep."

"No, I can't."

"Morning," Anita said as she stepped out of her front door puffy eyed and in her dressing gown. Her heavy bosom swung precariously into view.

There was more freedom in a prison than there was for the giant in the North Sea. He walked the rig and served the drill. He didn't need freedom. He didn't question the circumstances of his life in that way. He only needed a purpose and that was to be on the rig guarding the deep black vein that fuelled the world. In truth, the giant had been banished. His life was not even a penance that could be served out. When he had left the mother of his son to cope alone he made himself a remote and faceless creature. But then, like a sorceress shaping the narrative of her own life, she had conjured him into his steel fortress in the sea. He had become the giant of her dreams and an everyday hero fit for his son to believe in – all he had to do was never come back. For what he owed her, if he could not be the presence that made things happen then he would be absence that made all things possible. But a man, even a giant of a man, can only do so much.

The giant in the North Sea was not expecting visitors because there had been no flying machines or boats sliding down waves. Breaking off work to scan the horizon for signs like these was a constant ritual on board the rust-tanned hulk of his home. There had been nothing and yet somewhere inside doors were slamming like someone was moving down corridors, between chambers – getting closer.

For the first time in his impregnable isolation the giant felt fear. Who could have found their way here uninvited? He headed along a gangway and quickly hoisted himself up a ladder giving himself a vantage point over the door below. The metal hatch swung back and a young adventurer stepped through. A sack was slung over one dipped shoulder. His breastplate was nicked and tarnished from battles the giant should have been fighting. He looks like me, thought the giant, as the young man turned his head in his direction. The giant realised this moment was bound to come. It only took some imagination and curiosity. The young man was squinting against the sun.
"I can't see you. Are you there? Are you my dad?"

The man, who didn't know what he should do with Anita's milk any more, found ideas surging towards his mouth he didn't have words for. All he could manage was: "You want to put some clothes on."

Anita arched upright with her mouth open in shock: "Sorry?"

The plunging neckline of her dressing gown eased open a little further and Anita's fingers began twitching at the hem.

"Want a better look?" she tried to sound saucy, summoning the rosy-cheeked power of the seaside postcard onto the East Midlands asphalt. She wasn't expecting the tension in the air to chill her words into such a sneer.

Yes the man wanted a better look but he wanted everything that went with it too: the strength, the energy, the danger. He didn't want to be reminded how meaningless the comforts of a female body were to him. He didn't want to be taunted. Her milk could turn sour in the sun now, for all he cared.

Anita's son slouched out of the house with a kit bag hooked over one shoulder. She spun round, clutching her robe closed.

"Where are you going?"

"School."

"I thought you had free periods."

"I did, it's nearly lunchtime. You were asleep."

"We can talk later then, when you get home..."

"If you want," the boy said without looking round.

Anita watched him walk away, snatched up her milk and slammed her front door shut once she was inside.

On the wall there were three pictures of oil rigs taped up in a staggered line. They had been torn from magazines, the rough edges folded back. There was nothing else on display and to see the detail of the pictures you had to stand closer than the beige sofa would allow.

Anita told visitors that she had put them there for her son. "He's mad about oil rigs, his dad works on one," she would say, but as her son got older she found she wasn't so sure what he was mad about any more.

She looked at the pictures. She had shown them to the reporter who had called round. He said they looked like they were torn from magazines. He was interested in her anti-bullying campaign but he wanted background about her. Her son had left the room when she mentioned the oil rigs.

Anita thought it was time to take the pictures down. Her campaign had made it into the newspapers. She had other things on her mind and in a funny kind of way they were painful to look at. They hadn't proved anything to anyone except her. No-one believes.

She wondered if her gossiping neighbours had read the anti-bullying stories and whether they saw her in a new light now. Perhaps they even felt guilty for turning their noses up at her while she was tackling her own personal bullying crisis. She wondered whether she might be suited for local politics. It was easier to meet those kind of people when you were part of a campaign.

Anita got so close to a different life. She wouldn't have called it respectability but it would be nice not to worry about silly arguments over oil rigs any more. She joined a political party, became a candidate in a council election and waited to see what endorsement polling day might bring. She never found out.

Instead the newspapers discovered a video she had starred in about the fantasies of lonely housewives coming true. It retailed in British and European versions. It begins with her ushering men with a video camera into her crooked home. She sits in her low cut top and short skirt and reads a letter she wrote them: "I am a lonely housewife. I would like you and your sexy friends to pay me a visit because my husband works on the oil rigs and is away all the time..."

The North Sea giant was gripping the cold metal rungs but his fingers were so numb and senseless he could just as easily have been holding on to nylon thread. He listened, clenching his teeth on his own silence, as the young man cast his voice up into the dazzling sunlight.

"I just wanted to say I don't know if it's you up there, or a stranger, or a shadow – I don't care – you can come down, or go home or carry on if you want. I don't care. You aren't there to help me look after mum. They say all kinds of things about her. Some kid breaks our windows. Everyone thinks we are liars. That's what I care I about. I don't care about oil rigs. I don't care about you."

The giant didn't hear him go. The giant didn't see him go. He knew the size of the gap in his life now. He had always thought it was family sized but actually it was vast. It was everything.

INSPIRATION INFORMATION



Northampton is the biggest town in it's country and its growing. Like any other modern urban black hole, we may as well give it up as doomed. Regardless of race, gender, culture, religion or our choice of cereal, we all hate each other, things ain't what they used to be and the flags are all dead on the top of their poles etc. Only that's not true, is it? That's just what we're told. Turn on a TV, radio, or I-web interbox, and somebody will always be there to tell you how stuffed with evil crap you are. Where's hope? There's nothing funny about peace, love & understanding. It's just hard to find in a polished pre-packed plastic media, with its cheapening of culture and music. The blindness to historical lesson and farcical pantomiming of modern party politics isn't going to inspire anyone with an ounce of common sense. Someone's got to make a change. This can't go on. Maybe the people need to help the people. We need a mass plunger to shift the Piers Morgans & Nick Griffins out of our cosmic u-bend.

Inspiration doesn't come easy. Power and law stand in it's way. Its taken a long time to get here, but its coming 24/7 with the summer. The original Inspiration was a African Caribbean pirate radio station with a passion for music, dance & communication set up by Mark Dean & friends based in various secret Northamptonshire locations. It quickly became clear this could be more than just guys playing records and sharing information, this communicated to sidelines in a way mainstream media didn't. This was about giving a voice to people from unrepresented communities, reflecting their lives to others, breaking down barriers and stereotypes. They needed to be legal. Community radio. There is an underlining belief that whoever controls the media controls the people. So what happens when you want the people to control the media? This is not a smooth concept to sell. Who are you serving & what is your impact? If you want to be legal you have to show the right answers to these questions to grey men in grey offices in grey buildings over & over. Starting in 1996, Mark Dean has been on a long road of petitions, parliamentary papers, Ofcom reports, 15 Restricted service license trial runs, and many set-backs before getting the green light for 24 hours a day of music and chat for and about the Northampton community. Knowledge, empowerment and enlightenment gained from simple communication.

"Bad stories sell all the time. A lot of people talk about kids, but they don't talk to them. What does politics mean to them? Do they know who their MP is and are you even interested in voting? Let's hear the good things happening with teenagers. Kids are doing positive things & want to make changes in their lives. All's not lost. The world isn't about to end if you don't want it too. Lets get this optimism out there, the world isn't so bad. In a nice cheesy sound bite-lets put unity back into the community." - MARK DEAN on FM radio and streaming live on the Internet. Rough around the edges, but REAL... This is homemade not pre-packed. Music is Inspiration. An education for academic square pegs in round holes. Training opportunites for local people are part of community radio's licensing agreement. Some of the passing volunteers through Inspiration FM's doors have already left with skills that set them on their way to working for the biggest of media corporations. The music will be local, international, new & old. African, Irish, Indian, Polish, Greek, Turkish, all those elements & stories will be brought in. The doors are open for anyone willing and able, even Ex-mayors will come in and play their old blues 78's.

"We want to be the best community radio station in the country, and I think we will be. We're going to knock on the doors where other people don't go. If someone says 'you can't do this' or 'things will never change', well nothing could spur me on more to prove them wrong, very wrong. We exist to challenge that."-MARK DEAN

Find out what's happening on your doorstep. Make the best of what you've got. And you can surprise yourself with how much that actually is.

Inspiration FM will be transmitting on 105.8 Mhz from JULY 2010.



Postcard from The Parks Dept.

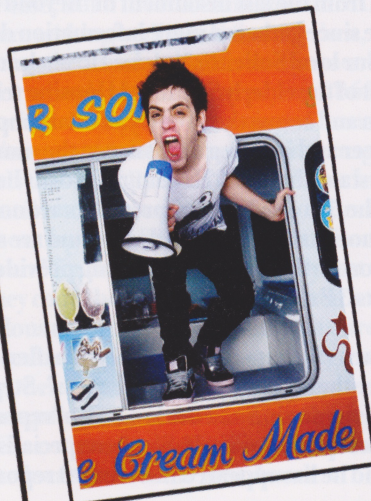
Hello you! Here's what's happening over here on Parks island... We were up and down the M1 all summer, ping-ponging from Northampton to London, and it was amazing and awful. London LOVES but you gotta watch out for those Shoreditch hairdo's! Are they so cool their hearts have turned to icebergs? You paid to get in, get involved, get the circulation going... I mean, at least the Grungers believed in their apathy. Oh bah, I dunno, maybe we're just hating the player?... Only if the game is nosing the brown-and we are arse KICKERS not KISSERS!

We're running now on full steam with six fully fledged crew members on board. We still need a cabin boy though-anyone up for swabbing our poops? Our debut album NO/NOISE will be unleashed in February so 2010 is going to be busy with our 1st ever UK tour and festival slots slotted. And... Keep it schtum, but our song 'Knife Crime' is up for possible inclusion in a rather large Hollywood movie - say no more - does that smell of bullshit? We don't know either.

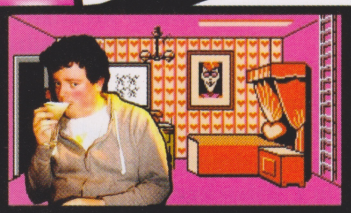
And I need the toilet.

Wish you were free - er!

The Parks Dept. xxx



**Preview:
An Evening With
Winston Echo**



When spring thaws the doors of The Fishmarket, that plywood palace of glittering delights will host a second run of monthly events under the banner 'An Evening With Winston Echo', a rusty star-spangled jamboree of twee, curated by Northampton's own misanthropic dreamer: Winston Echo. Taking to the Nook Café stage as though he was the digital-age black sheep of the Tarbuck dynasty or the bastard nephew of Clement Freud & Les Dawson. And what a little bastard. Winston will spoil you with "a fine, hand-picked selection of music, film, poetry, comedy & strangeness", from both himself & his many odd, odd friends. Anyone who witnessed 2009's spectacular 'Jurassic Park: The Musical', will attest to how great these hotchpotch jumble-sale's of ideas can be, if we just don't heckle, we can all get out again with our dignity intact. "I like being silly, but this is not a comedy" insists Echo. "Some of my songs are funny, but this is not a joke." He may be armed and suicidal, but don't worry, its only a water pistol he forgot to fill.

Each evening culminates in a cherry - picked live act with a similarly DIY ethos as young master Echo. Maybe a charity shop Casio keyboard, a guitar made from a cornflakes box, and someone banging a dustbin lid with a cricket bat put through a looper.

Also, the café has a wide selection of alcohol and sweet treats. If none of that sounds appealing just come to watch him turn red and sweaty when it all starts going wrong.

Dates, details, & ticket prices to be confirmed. Entertainment guaranteed.

www.myspace.com/winstonecho

Beyond the Norm

Like a crazed Japanese soldiers bunkered in the jungle and refusing to accept the war is over, Norman Adams dismisses the last thirty years of political history as enemy propaganda. He returns, sniping from the tree-line, for another airing of Northampton's dirty laundry.

Following on from the last instalment of 'Beyond the Norm', I have since gathered more information detailing the battle of our local Solicitor Yvonne Hossack and the fighting spirit of the elderly Sheltered Housing tenants in Northampton and across the country. The attempts to end Yvonne's career and in doing so to silence the campaign to retain or reinstate Sheltered Housing Wardens has been scuppered. The 50 or so housing providers are now lined up like dominoes to face legal challenges and are starting to fall. The score in the Tenants v Housing providers battle so far: Tenants 3 Providers 0

Yvonne Hossack (Solicitor) and Stephen Knafler (Barrister) are the legal team for the tenants'. Stephen has a fantastic reputation and the long list of reported and successful cases speaks for itself. Stephen specialises in public law, and he has appeared in over 100 reported cases.

Many of these are landmark decisions relevant to community care, discrimination, health and mental health, asylum support, social security, immigration, prisons, education, public authority negligence, human rights, civil liberties and housing cases.

In the last few years, Stephen has represented Shelter, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, the Women's Aid Federation of England and others on a pro bono basis (done for the public good without compensation.)

Campaigners for sheltered housing wardens have since won legal cases against Barnet and Portsmouth councils. The High Court ruled in favour of campaigners who argued against the removal of wardens, supported by solicitor Yvonne Hossack, who is bringing a series of judicial reviews against sheltered housing providers. Portsmouth council had previously already removed wardens and introduced a mobile night service. It has now been ordered to reinstate wardens by 8 January. Barnet - known for its idea to remodel itself on budget airline easy-Jet - will not be able to proceed with its plan to replace wardens with a peripatetic support alarm service. Judge Milwyn Jarman ruled both councils had acted unlawfully.

In December the High Court ruled in favour of Ms Hossack in another case. It found Circle 33 Housing Trust had acted unlawfully by removing a live-in warden service without consulting residents first. Campaigners are now confident that they can hold the line (keep the wardens we have) regain lost ground and reinstate the ones lost. We rightly refused to accept any cuts in our service and care. You may wonder, how have our elderly, frail, vulnerable and perceived as powerless tenants taken things to this stage? By the adoption of this ethos ...

don't vegetate but agitate.

.... To be continued





PANTO

County Council and the Seven Twats

Moving swiftly on to additional local government nostalgia, a decision was provisionally made to gift a Northampton School and its land to the United Learning Trust. It would seem that ALL apart from the 'not so magnificent seven' members of the cabinet were opposed to this proposal. In addition the Local consultation process evidenced that 97% of correspondents opposed these plans. At a subsequent meeting, 24 members of the public including myself spoke passionately against the plans, and opposition councillors pleaded with the Squireocracy to have a change of heart and not undermine the communities' interests. What a pity that the seven members of cabinet don't appear to be listening to the public. Local independent Councillor Tony Clarke wrote: "This County Council cabinet meeting may go down in history as the day on which Joe Public finally gave up on Northamptonshire County Council ever being able to describe itself as an accountable and listening Local Council." The decision made by seven cabinet members, [none of whom represent wards in Northampton close to Western Favell school] to gift the surrounding land to the United Learning Trust to be run as an academy could evoke irreparable damage to the Council's reputation and it is difficult to see just what their motive is.

Rallying against the plans are the pupils, teachers, Weston Favell School governors, parents, the town's two MP's, the prospective parliamentary candidates from all other parties and the entire Borough Council; alongside Conservative County Councillors from within their own group who knew that what they were doing was not only wrong, but that it was also an act of political suicide on behalf of the Conservative Party given the 97% opposition to their plans.

Dave Green speaking on behalf of Save Our Public Services against the move to ignore the consultation results and against the move towards setting up an academy at the Weston Favell School stated "I'm not going to repeat all of the excellent arguments being put forward here" - exposing the consultation process for the con it was and the flawed reasoning behind the setting up of an academy. Historically our local authority has a poor record on consultation and again the public opinions appear not to be upheld.

By ignoring the consultation, I would like to invite you to draw the comparison with a typical Vicar of Dibley proceeding or with Robert Mugabe's concept of democracy in Zimbabwe. The standard set by former Eastern Bloc mock elections when the ruling party claimed 90% support for their policies, has been taken one step further by Northamptonshire County Council's pretence that a 4% support for their policies represents a vote in favour.

We, in Save Our Public Services, say grant the parents, pupils and staff what they have clearly shown they want - No Academy at Weston Favell School. Dave Green of Save Our Public Services made the call for it to go for a full council debate and that seems to have been picked up. As Tony Clarke writes:

"After the meeting, opposition Councillors rightfully called in writing, as is allowed for in the constitution for the decision to be decided by motion at Full Council by way of having no confidence in the Cabinets actions and asking for the Secretary of State to refuse to yield to their plans."

Northamptonshire County Council uses the argument that education will get extra finance from the questionable sponsors of this proposed academy. Many people think that is not the case, but if the Northamptonshire County Council are seeking additional finance then, perhaps they should scrap the scandalous Private Finance Initiative PFI scheme for schools which sees us paying £863 million to PFI financiers through the financing of loans, outrageous fixed maintenance contracts and their management costs for schools that actually cost £235 million. In simple terms this Council is to pay nearly four times the real cost of the schools, wasting literally hundreds of millions of pounds on banks and financiers, who've already cost us dear, when that money could be spent on our children's education. It is scandalous that that the Northamptonshire County Council continue with this scheme, with cross party support, when public finance experts say that even if we were to scrap the PFI contract and pay the penalties, we would still save hundreds of millions that could be usefully spent on education over the next decades.

So, seconds out, round two in January where no doubt even more people will want to speak and play their part in informing our local champions of democracy, but will they listen this time? And if not, is it because they are brave Tories of the "not for turning" fraternity, or Stupid enough not to see a political own goal right before their eyes? Or maybe it's that they are simply so arrogant they care nothing for the views of the public and care nothing for the future of the children who will inevitably suffer as a result of their continued interference and political dogma?

Bulletin

At 4:30pm on 22 December the Secretary of State [Ed Balls MP] made a statement that United Learning Trust will withdraw from their current planned Northamptonshire Academy projects. But: Mr Balls made it clear in an email that new sponsors will be sought as soon as possible. So it would seem we are back to square one, and 2010 will see the battle re-run. It remains to be seen if the same unity of purpose can be maintained.

The decision to gift a Northampton School and its land to United Learning Trust is off - BUT the government seems to be determined to find someone, anyone, to take it!



THE DESTRUCTOR DIARIES

Following last issue's piece on human dumping-ground Spring Boroughs and its long since disappeared symbolic smokestack, Alan Moore returns for a seasonal look at last year's highlights in this blighted neighbourhood that once, a thousand years ago, was the whole town.

Ten years is a long time. It's been ten years since 'New' Labour's extravagant millennial promotional activity failed, literally, to set the Thames on fire. Ten years is also what gets shaved off of your life expectancy by living in the Boroughs rather than even ten yards away across Crane Hill in run-down Semilong: a year a yard. There seem to be more ways to die down there, down where I grew up, where the scum-line permanently marks the bottom of the valley.

You could die of cold, for instance, picked off by pneumonia like one vulnerable resident of St. Mark's House over the Christmas before last when radiators and hot water were both off for a few days, just as had happened every winter for the previous ten years. Speaking in March one fellow occupant, a Mr. Barton, estimated that two months of heating paid for by the tenants were lost every year, thousands of pounds stolen from the town's poorest people without any adequate return for their investment. Mr. Barton made his protest and it was ignored. After all, given that Boroughs residents are pretty much by definition powerless, what was he going to do?

Since World War I, the area's been less a neighbourhood than a brutally implemented eugenics experiment, apparently intended to weed out the poor and the unsightly. Send the rubbish down there to get rid of it, the way they did when the original incinerator was still standing. No one cares about the people living there. They're all disposable, no use as anything but prey for the developer, the curb crawler, or other social predators. When I was six and playing with some friends on an abandoned car down at the bottom end of Castle Street, I was dragged screaming to the rear seat of an idling vehicle belonging to a passing motorist, a young man of the lower middle classes out sightseeing with his girlfriend in the slums. I made a lot of noise; they let me go. If I recall their faces now it's with a made-up overlay of Myra Hindley, Ian Brady, though of course it wasn't. Too far south. My point is, even if it had been, then in that district it wouldn't much have mattered.

Fifty years of social progress later and a little further up the hill, on a Saturday night in late May of 2009, two of my brother's workmates passing by St. Katherine's House were startled by a short scream and a thirty-something woman's body suddenly impacting with the ground just a few feet in front of them. Initially believed to be a murder, it was later ruled an accidental death. Then, in October, a much-loved grandmother of Somali origins plunged from an upstairs floor of Berkeley House into the sunken rubbish-bin enclosure down below, another accidental death. Perhaps they're building sills too low these days, although back in the 1930s Boroughs women were continually throwing themselves from the upstairs windows of their terraced house in over-optimistic suicide attempts, left at home by their working husbands to face the damp and despair alone.

This century-old spectre of neglect still takes its exercise around the flats and tower-blocks, buildings meant as temporary housing when they were erected forty, fifty, sixty years ago. Brian Foley died in his St. Stephen's House flat and was not found for three days. Another man in the same building jumped from the fifth floor. A woman some floors down was strangled by her alcohol-fuelled husband, even after constant complaints to the Council over the abuse. Men hang themselves on Christmas Eve or die of liver failure in disgustingly damp rooms. The physically or mentally incapable are left to cope alone, abandoned, lost and prey to vicious bullying. A death that follows years of chronic alcohol dependence and a stabbing gets marked down to natural causes. How can this continual flood of horror stories be allowed to carry on? It must presumably be down to unbelievable incompetence, since the alternative is that the situation's tacitly accepted as a way of thinning out the inconvenient paupers hindering the proposed cultural mile's potentially lucrative development. Which would be monstrous.

Meanwhile, in October Mr. Barton finally had council workers come to check on his reported water leak. They called when he was out, broke in, and changed the lock on his front door. His earlier protests having been ignored, he stormed into the town hall with a billhook, which he sunk into a table. He got a two year suspended sentence. Those responsible for his distress escaped unscathed. Of course, this may not always be the case. Last issue's piece compared St. Katherine's House, condemned by fire services, to the high-rise in Camberwell that went up like a torch last spring. I note from coverage in Private Eye that the council in question has recently taken on a lawyer specialising in defending cases of corporate manslaughter. This is serious. Our leaders should sort out this lethal mess before another ten years have statistically increased the death toll, or risk ending their careers in prison, possibly next to Mr. Barton and his billhook.